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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a pilot program for a writing course taught by four teachers at Drexel University. One of the primary assumptions was that a course in writing was also one in language. The object of the course was to ask the students to become conscious of themselves as learners and writers and to attempt to discover the function of language in learning. The first assignment asked the students to speculate about the meaning of a college education and about what learning is. Another assignment asked the students to describe, from memory, the face of a telephone dial. When the students compared the actual dial to their descriptions, they found that learning is fundamentally not what we experience, but what we tell ourselves we have experienced--that learning is language "about" experience. The paper discusses subsequent theme assignments leading up to a final theme that asked the students to assess what they had learned about learning, language, and writing. The author concludes that the course was valuable because it left the students with an informed responsibility for their own education and gave them a chance "to belong to themselves." (DI)

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The Teaching of Writing: An Invitation to Becoming

We started, the four of us who put together the pilot program for a staff-taught writing course at Drexel University, with the shared understanding that no one can make someone else a writer. We also shared an understanding that it was possible to do better than pretend that we did not believe this, or to behave as though we wished it were not true. To put our course together, we began with the assumption that since the process of writing as a process, and for anyone who chooses to involve himself with it, is as important for what it is about as for what it is, then the real value of a course in writing, while realized through the activity of writing, may be said to lie beyond that activity in something else. We assumed, that is, that we would be giving our students the most that we could give them, not by asking them to become writers, not even by asking them to imagine what they could do if they were writers, but by putting them into a position to see what they could learn about language and themselves as language-users through their attempts to act like writers. We wanted a course in writing that would be a course in language as well, a course that would have as its subject the activity of composing in the largest possible sense of the term. We wanted a course that would enable us to suggest to our students the ways in which their lives, no less than their papers, are composed, composed by language, designed and arranged by the symbol systems through which all of us see the world and by which we are in turn given the identities we have. We sought therefore to develop a course that would deal with the workings of English in such a way as to demonstrate how an understanding of one language was relevant to an understanding of language in general, a procedure that we hoped would give, say, a future mathematician at least the opportunity through his experience with the writing of English to become more aware of himself as a user of the language of mathematics.

The first step that we took in translating our assumptions about the possibility and value of such a course into a syllabus and a procedure was in a sense a step to the side, a step to eliminate the more obvious guarantees of our seeing our students'

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writing as something other than writing, of our seeing writing as other than a matter of the workings of language. We did not ground our course in the notion that our students had to be taught the rudiments of English usage slowly, painstakingly--not because some of them do not need such instruction, but because we believed, and still do, that at any university which is a university, the responsibility to write decently belongs to the student alone, and we found that the enactment of this belief in the form of a refusal to deal with indecency was the fastest way to obtain the standards we behaved as though we were simply taking for granted. Neither did we want our course to have as its subject some focus to which the act of the students' composing his own experience in words, sentences, paragraphs was subsidiary. So we decided to fold up the game board, to burn the play money for all of us, to strip ourselves no less than we were going to strip our students of all the protective paraphernalia of both the gimcrack and the standard freshman composition course.

We got rid of everything it is such a constant temptation for teachers and students alike to look at writing from behind or through or under. We weren't going to play guitars for our students or have them pop balloons. The anthology went; the standard plays, novels, and poems. We threw out the style manual, even the handbook. Above all the handbook. Rather than using a text we decided to create one, a text made out of a direction we agreed to take in common in the form of a set of assignments and class exercises that we agreed to teach in common. These materials we would try to make represent the very best that our pooled intellectual resources were capable

of creating for the students, at the same time they were to be constructed so as to allow each of us, four very different kinds of teachers, to preserve and refine the integrity of his own style. We sought, that is, a syllabus and a procedure that would force us to ask of ourselves as teachers no less than we were asking our students to ask of themselves: a way of shaping what we shared in common into the expression of our uniqueness as individuals. For all of us, like it or not, the subject was going to be writing as language. That was all we had left: our assignments and class exercises, the students' papers, and each other.

The nominal subject we used as a way of asking our students to become conscious of themselves as writers was that of teaching and learning: what does it mean to teach or to be taught? how does one go about learning?; what is the function of language in these processes?; how does one make use of his way of addressing such questions in order to locate himself as a language user in relation to his own education? Although we had no doctrine, no philosophy either homespun or highflown for the students to become aware of and give back to us, before we began the term I devised a set of problems intended to involve us in a consideration of these questions from a number of different perspectives, a sort of ur-syllabus that gave us at least a place to begin, a tentative way for the course to proceed, and somewhere for us to come out. I designed each problem, one for every class meeting of the term, so that it could be used as either a class exercise or as a writing assignment. As a staff we met once a week to consider the items of the syllabus for the week following--scrapping, substituting, rewriting, rearranging,--

until we had the wording of each item and the order of things in a form acceptable to all of us. This was an exacting as well as an exciting procedure, a way of making sure first of all that we would communicate with one another in much the same way we were demanding our students communicate with us--which is a lot harder for teachers to do than most of us as teachers like to believe; and secondly, that we would as a consequence stay pure in what we were doing, that we would keep our questions open questions. We did not want to dump on our students a mere potpourri of problems relating to teaching and learning, but we did not want to design a sequence of problems exactly either, a set of assignments marching syllogistically to some predetermined Grand Conclusion. We wanted a syllabus that would make impossible the discovery of a point or message at the same time that in order to be made sense of it would have to be arranged into some sort of pattern--a pattern which for better or worse in being the expression of what each individual had made his experience with the course mean to him, would be the expression also of each individual's understanding of himself as a language user.

We began with an in-class paper which even with its built in caveats we did not expect to do much more than unleash the worst sorts of cant about education:

> This writing assignment is for the purpose of sorting you out as individuals. Your paper will be read as soon as you have written it, but will not be returned to you until later in the term.
>
> (Have your English teachers in the past always returned your work to you right away? Do you find yourself at all suspicious of the claim that "your paper will be read as soon as you have written it?")
>
> You have not been in college very long, perhaps, but you have certainly speculated on why you are here to begain with and not somewhere else, on what it is you

> imagine you are doing here, on the meaning of a college education in the context of your own life. Take the rest of the period to address yourself to what you expect of the process of teaching and learning in your years at Drexel. What is it you want to learn exactly? How do you propose to go about doing it? Do you intend to do as you're told, is that what learning consists of? Or do you intend to do something other than what you're told? And what do you expect of your teachers? Are they to provide information only? Are they to interfere with your way of thinking? Do you have an idea of what a Good Teacher is? What's a Good Student?
>
> If you find it difficult to draw lines here, face your puzzlement squarely. What is it that you find baffling or perplexing about such a subject? It is, after all, your education you're talking about.

The students, of course, no more sorted themselves out as individuals than they saw very much to be puzzled about *in* such an assignment. We were addressed by a corporate identity informing us that it had come to college To Be Educated, to be guided, steered, directed, formed, shaped, molded, and so on by teachers whose sympathy, understanding, tolerance and unfailing goodwill it was hoped could be depended upon to throw the switch that would painlessly complete the circuit of knowledge. Plainly, there was much that could be done.

As a way of challenging the validity of these metaphors and the easy assertions that the use of them had dictated, we began with a series of writing assignments involving some commonplace talk about learning and the learning process, some of the more simple (and often simple-minded) ways in which learning is represented as both understandable and understood by everyone. What is knowledge that is "knitted into your very being?" we asked the students to begin with. Can it be unraveled? What happens, for example, when you change your mind? Is there a difference between knowledge that is "knitted into your very being" and

some other kind of knowledge? How about rote-learning? What kind of knowledge is that? What's it good for? How much of your education, your life, would you say depends upon it? And now, how much of what you've just said about rote-learning in your last paper would you say is rote learned--in style and manner as well as in attitude? Is your writing therefore rote-learned? You know how to write a Theme, don't you? You know what Theme-writing, junk writing is, don't you? You can write a Theme on anything, and at a moment's notice, and then describe how you did it and why it's a trick you've performed. Is your own writing Themewriting? Is your way of writing, of seeing, "knitted into your very being?"

With representative samplings of the students' papers as our texts, what we sought to do in the first several weeks of the course, then, was to invite our students to confront the distance between their conventional expression of the equally conventional assumptions about the learning process, and the complexity, the mysteriousness of the act of learning itself. Or in terms of our real subject, we sought to emphasize for our students the distance between the ways they had been taught and had taught themselves to write, to see, to behave--particularly when they believed they knew what was going to be expected of them--and the nature of their experience as individuals.

That the quality of all experience like the act of learning depends on language was a notion we introduced with an assignment on the telephone dial. We had the students try to reproduce the telephone dial from memory in class, which of course none of them could do with very much accuracy (the average number of mistakes is about two dozen). We then had them check the sketches they

had made of the dialing mechanism against the dial itself, and write a paper in which they attempted to account for what they'd got right and what they'd got wrong. "On the basis of your experience with this exercise," the assignment concluded, "what is it that you 'know' exactly when you say that you know what the telephone dial looks like? Does your way of answering this question lead you to conclude anything about your relationship to your learning?" What emerged in our discussion of this assignment in class, is that we learn or know not what we experience but what we tell ourselves we have learned or that we know, what we have in some way verbalized to ourselves in some form of language. Those who knew, for example, that the letters Q and Z are not used in the dialing mechanism not only knew that they knew this, but how they knew it. "I heard it on a quiz program once." "I once had to find numerical equivalents for each letter and I noticed then." What was remembered here, the exercise seemed to suggest, had less to do with what is commonly known as experience than it did with one's language about experience--a proposition of no great moment when it is simply the telephone dial one is thinking of, but of considerable importance when it comes to the relationship of language to the control each one of us assumes ever his own life. What do I now have of my "experience" in the fourth grade? Where are all those lesser known Shakespeare plays that I've read but was never made to write papers on? What is the nature of my experience, indeed what is the quality of my life, when I give it no more substance than that of the Thenewriter's bloodless abstractions: we had a swell time; she was really cool; it was a great trip?

To give the students an opportunity to elaborate on the connection of learning to language, we then turned to some

examples of learning as a process in order to question the relation of approach to result. Here was Malcolm X in prison[1], barely literate, copying out the entire dictionary by hand in order to become a writer and a speaker. Here was Benjamin Franklin[2] with his scheme for self-improvement, his set of virtues and the check-list with which he rated himself at the end of each day. Just rote learning from one point of view, but what was the relationship between what Malcolm X and Franklin told themselves that their rote learning meant and what they became? Was not what the two men did on the basis of what they told themselves they were doing a matter of the development of a language which in combining a way of expressing where they were with somewhere that they wanted to be assured at least that they would grow? Though Malcolm X could see his handwriting becoming better and his ability with words increase, there is some question whether he ever became the writer and the speaker he wanted to become. Franklin saw his faults "diminish" but by his own admission he never attained the perfection he hoped for. But from another point of view, each man did better than become what he had set out to become. In his attempt to become more than he was, each had developed a language that enabled him to belong to himself, to assume responsibility for the shape of his own life.

An account of the conversion experience of a drunkard as

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[1] Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), p. 172.

[2] Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (New York: The Pocket Library, 1954), pp. 102-106.

quoted by William James[3] suggested the fruitfulness of such a way of seeing the importance of language to the learning process by providing a very clear example of a man's making sense of his present with a language for his past that gives him a chance for a future. The alcoholic's account of his experience-- a "great and mightly presence" leads him from a saloon, "something" makes him have himself locked up to withdraw from liquor, an "admonishing spirit" enjoins him to prayer, and so on--makes plain that the events leading to his sobriety, which after his conversion at a mission he names as the action of "Jesus," are events that from another point of view or by someone else might easily have been named differently: as hallucinations, for example, or the awakening of conscience, or the resurgence of the ego, or as incipient D.T.'s. But just as plainly, another way of naming , a secularized or medical interpretation of what led to the alcoholic's conversion, would for him have robbed his way of seeing his experience of all of its transforming power. What saved the alcoholic, in other words, was not an experience but language about that experience, a very particular language which in enabling him to postulate a power greater than himself--a power synonymous with protection, comfort, friendship, and salvation--gave him a power greater than he had. How the alcoholic named was thereby a demonstrable reflex of what he was choosing to be: sober, master of his life. A language in being made The Language in being made his language in turn made him.

With a passage written by a madman, also quoted by William James[4],

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[3] William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Modern Library, 1929), pp. 198-199.

[4] Ibid, pp. 145-146.

we had an example of the inversion of this process, language used not to order and make liveable the chaos of experience, but to order experience as chaos which is unliveable. The voice of the passage names the world in such a way as to bankrupt the whole activity of naming. Hence the speaker sees himself afflicted by a God which he first makes synonymous with the Devil, a coupling he then turns into an "invisible enemy," reduces further to a "him" and finally to an "it" which he makes co-terminous with the "horrible misery" of consciousness itself. Sleep for him becomes nightmare, the hospital he is in a place of suffering, his family is his torturer--everything, in short, which could carry the possibility of restoration or comfort is defined as its opposite. It is not a world such a voice creates but an anti-world, one in which the alcoholic's "mighty presence" moves not to the saving formulation of a concept such as Jesus, but back to the rawness of indefinable sensation. The ferocity of the madman's devotion to allowing no vantage point from which to develop a language for the placing of his sickness as sickness is his pledge to remain his own prisoner. Worse than insane, the madman is committed to it.

In order to develop another perspective from which to see the relationship of language to the learning process we moved next to some examples of teachers and teaching. We focused particularly on the teaching of Louis Agassiz as it was experienced and recalled by his students, a methodology, by the way, for which our procedures in the course were an obvious analogue. The core of this section of the syllabus was Nathaniel Shaler's famous account[5] of his first touch with Agassiz' style as a teacher.

[5] Nathaniel Shaler, The Autobiography of Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907), pp. 93-7.

Crammed into one corner of the packed and smelly room that at the time served Agassiz as a laboratory, forbidden to talk or to read about or above all to damage the small preserved fish that Agassiz placed before him, Shaler was told simply to look at the specimen and to find out what he could about it. Agassiz then seemingly had no more to do with his student, not that day or the next or the next. When, after a hundred hours of work or so on a project that he had at first imagined would occupy him no more than a few minutes, Shaler proudly disgorged his findings to his teacher, he was sent back to begin again with what was to become for all of Agassiz' students their teacher's all too familiar response to imperfection: "That is not right." "In another week of ten hours a day labor," Shaler says, "I had results which astonished myself and satisfied him"--a satisfaction Agassiz expressed not by means of any "praise in words or manner," but by placing before Shaler "half a peck of bones" to make sense of. And so what Shaler calls his "education" proceeded, his learning "the art of comparing objects which is the basis of the naturalist's work."

To judge from the accounts of such men as Shaler (and Scudder, Wilder, and Verrill[6]), we asked our students, what was it that Agassiz taught exactly? What did the teaching process consist of? Did all Agassiz' students learn the same thing? Was what the students seemed to think they learned that which a reader would say they learned? And where, we asked our students further, do you find yourself with Agassiz as a teacher? Can you imagine

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[6] See Lane Cooper, Louis Agassiz as a Teacher (Ithaca, New York: Comstock Publishing Co., Inc., 1945).

electing to study under such a man in such a system? Can you imagine learning under such working conditions? How would you respond to a teacher who told you after you had worked for a hundred hours on a project simply that what you had done wasn't right? How would you respond to a teacher with "no trace of praise in [his] words or manner?" Or would it depend? On what? Would you say that Agassiz was a Good Teacher? What would you mean by saying that he was or wasn't, and what is the basis for your evaluation? Do you have a scale for rating teachers? What is your unit of measure?

The only answer to such questions, of course, is a position, what each of us--teachers as well as students--chose to make such questions involve on the basis of how he decided to address them. For me with my students, this positioning took the form of an attempt to see the processes of teaching and learning as involving a complementary responsibility with language. Malcolm X, Franklin, the alcoholic, and Shaler were successful learners in that each developed a new language with which to name, to interpret, to create his experience so as to enable him to become more than he was. When such learners changed what they looked at, they changed what they saw. When they changed what they saw, they changed who they were. Agassiz, we concluded, was a good teacher for students who chose to see him that way, for students who chose to be students. He did more than give his students a language for their experience with natural history; he gave them that which compelled them to develop a language for that experience themselves. He gave them a vocabulary for which they had to become the syntax. He offered a style as an invitation to develop a style.

In the assignments which led up to the final paper of the term, we asked the students to confront the question of barriers to learning, to explore the ambiguity of attitude with which all of us regard the process of education when it is seen in terms of a change of self. It is obvious, we began, that even with the best will in the world, and no matter how experienced or skilled they may be, teachers do not always teach. Nor do students, even when they are intelligent, highly-motivated, well-prepared, etc. always learn. What's the trouble here? Why doesn't an educational institution work better than it does? Why doesn't education work better then it does--even when everyone wants it to? We looked at a science fiction story[7] in which two children discover some educational toys sent back from the future and use them to develop a language which enables them to pass literally (and permanently) into another dimension. Was education, learning, a way of adjusting one to his environment, or of isolating him from it? Here was a nonsense story[8], a story contrived to create the illusion of a sense that can never be realized (and yet that one cannot stop trying to realize) in order to make a joke about the winning of order from chaos, to suggest that the patterns of language with which we seek to make over chaos are no more than that: arbitrary orderings, constructs, fictions, that for all their power to stay confusion

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[7]Lewis Padgett, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. I, Ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 180-208.

[8]Edward Gorey, The Willowdale Handcar.

are momentary only and no guide to truth. Similarly, an account of the significance of Lobachevsky's invention of non-Euclidian geometry[9] raised the question of whether it were only a little knowledge that could be considered a dangerous thing. Lobachevsky's invention did make it possible to conceive of other ways of interpreting the human experience of space, but in changing the concept of space so as to make clear the ways in which a system was but a system, what happened to the concept of human experience? Was this why, in the words of Wilfred Trotter, "a new idea [was] the most quickly acting antigen known to science?" In our ordinary talk about education, our next to last writing assignment read, the open mind is praised, the closed mind condemned; but for all of us there are parts of the present and the future about which we are already decided, about which none of us intends to change if he can help it. What sort of person would believe that you should change your mind all the time about everything indefinitely? Where do you draw the line, or more likely the lines, when it comes to your own life? What do you do to protect your beliefs? Are there certain discussions you just turn away from? Is there evidence you refuse to consider? Have you ever changed your mind about anything even when you haven't wanted to? Whatever your position on such questions, do you see the problem here posing any difficulties for you as a student at a university?

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9 W.J.J. Gordon, Synectics: The Development of Creative Capacity (New York: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 125-126.

The final writing assignment for the term took us full circle. We headed the paper with Henry Adams' famous quotation:

> From cradle to grave this problem of running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been and must always be, the task of education....

The assignment read as follows:

This is the last paper you will write for this course. It is an opportunity for you to put some things together for yourself, whatever it is you care to connect in whatever order you choose.

Imagine someone who has just read over everything you have been given to read for this course this term saying something like this to you:

> "What does it mean exactly that the real subject of this course is language but that the metaphor used to talk about it is teaching and learning? What does teaching and learning have to do with language? Your learning specifically? And what does this have to do with your writing? Are you supposed to have become a writer or what?"

Write a paper in which you attempt to answer him.

You might begin by rereading the mimeographed material which has been distributed to you: the writing assignments, the class exercises, the papers written by your fellow students, the description of the course. You may also wish to recall conversations you have had about the course or in it. Most important, you will want to read back over your own work, for it is not a course you are going to be talking about in this paper, but your course. It is not the experience of a we (either supposed or actual) that this someone is interested in, but your experience, the experience of an I, of another someone. For this reason you might therefore wish to consider whether you are sure that you want to say obvious things such as "My writing has improved" (or "failed to improve"). Do you really want to bother with trying to guess what you think someone else wants you to say? Do you really want to bother at this point with the clichés?

But how are you going to say that you're better than, or worse than, or just the same as you were without simply asking someone to take your word for it? Suppose you aren't the writer that you want to be? Does this mean that your time has been wasted? That you wasted your time? Any other possibilities?

Perhaps a good place to begin your thinking out a way to address the problem of this paper would be by considering specifically the first paper you wrote for the course, that in-class paper which has just been returned to you. Who were you in that paper? Who are you now? Have you changed your mind about anything? What is there you haven't changed your mind about?

The format of that assignment represents our effort to embody the notion that teaching and learning finally are worth no more than they can be made to mean. That meaning, however, we were just as clear, must be judged in terms of what it has the potential to involve as well as in terms of what it does. In attempting to imagine as the audience for our course the best of what we believed our students capable, and in devising a syllabus to raise and clarify problems that no educational process can proceed without reference to, we sought to make available to our students that which they could grow to as well as with. In a very real way our course was created to begin at its conclusion. We did not turn our students into writers; no course does that, and no course can. But what we did do seems tothe four of us better than to have settled for some next best thing. For in seeing writing as involving the workings of language in the way that we did, we provided our students with a way of seeing what there could be <u>in</u> the activity of writing for anyone who seeks to involve himself with it. And in leaving to our students, as Agassiz did, the responsibility of devising a language for whatever they cared to make this mean, we were offering them a chance to belong to themselves.

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